ventnorensis

Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society Journal

'It seems you can't bring up children without meeting for coffee, so get the mothers and toddlers in here! Let them get mucky. A new generation is interested in gardening. Why not have classes for them?'

Val Pitts, Chairman, Page 21

VOLUME 29 NO. 2 AUTUMN/WINTER 2022

Autumn/winter opening times

9am till 4pm daily. Plantation Room Café is open daily from 10am, serving breakfast, lunch and cake. *edulis* Restaurant is closed for the season. Admission by card machine only. For opening times, and for information about special events for adults or children, details of the café, and for Plant Sales and Greenhouse, please call the Garden on 855387 or check website, www.botanic.co.uk.

Exhibitions/Events

Almost daily the Garden hosts classes such as Yoga, Dance, Tai Chi and Qigong. See the website for details: www.botanic.co.uk/what's on

WINTER SPECIAL EVENTS

Artist in Residence: Visit Mark Cosby in the Studio and see his work. See Page 29

January 2023

Jan 29th 2.30pm-3.30pm New Year Energy - Sound Bath

Connect to your own inner power and energy with singing bowls, crystal bowls, drum and gong. £10

February 2023

13th: Flora & Fauna from the Past on Dinosaur Isle, **VBGFS Café Botanique** talk by Martyn Hornett with John Sibbeck at Ventnor Arts Club, 6.30 for 7pm

March 2023

13th: From Hospital Beds to Flowerbeds, a **VBGFS Café Botanique** talk by Jonyth Hill at Ventnor Arts Club, 6.30 for 7pm

April 2023

20th, 7pm **VBGFS AGM**

Watch your email inbox - or check ventnorbotanicfriends.org.uk - for notices about the following:

Friends' Society visit to Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens in the spring

Friends' Society visit to Thenford Arboretum in the autumn

THE VBG DAILY WELLBEING PROGRAMME: please check availability

Mondays

10.00am-11.00am: Tai Chi, intermediate with Tony, in the Echium Room

11.30am-12.30pm: Pilates for All, with Penny, in the Echium room

1.30pm-3.00pm: Creative Dance, all levels, with Michelle. Echium Room

Tuesdays

9.30am-11am: Hatha Yoga, suitable for all, with Trish, Echium Room

12.00-1.00pm: Qigong, suitable for all, with Garry, Echium Room

Wednesdays

9.30am-10.30am: Tai Chi for beginners with Tony, Echium Room

10.30am-11.30am: Tai Chi for intermediates with Tony, Echium Room

10.30am-11.30am: Release, all welcome, with Firebird in Canna Room

12.00-1.00pm: Sunshine Sessions, all welcome, with Firebird, Echium Room

11.45am-2.45pm: Ballet Body Fitness, all levels, with Chantal, Echium Room

Thursdays

10.30am-11.30am: Chair Burlesque, suitable for all, with Coco, Echium Room

12.00-1.30pm Qigong, all levels, with Garry, Echium Room

Fridays

09.30am-11.00am: British Yoga Wheel, all levels, with Mark, Echium Room

11.15am-12.15pm: Tai Chi, advanced, with Tony, Echium Room

For further information on Wellbeing Classes visit the Website: www.botanic.co.uk/wellbeing

Front Cover: Photograph by Roz Whistance

Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society

President
Mike Fitt OBE

Chairman
Val Pitts - 07887 848449

Vice Chairman
Peter Coleman

Hon Treasurer
Tim Woodcock - 872519

Hon Secretary
Jenny Parker - 730668

Membership Secretary
Anne Hornett - 07958 114019

Publicity
Rosemary Stewart - 292107

Education
Sally Peake - 731403

Events
Bridgette Sibbick - 867739

Editor Friends' Website
Colin Smith - 856578
Email: smith3c@hotmail.com
www.ventnorbotanicfriends.org.uk

***Ventnorensis* Editor**
Ros Whistance - 07850 505977
rosalind.whistance@gmail.com

Gardening Volunteers
Wednesday mornings 10 am
Bridgette Sibbick - 867739

Curator
Chris Kidd

Garden Address
Ventnor Botanic Garden
Undercliff Drive
Ventnor
Isle of Wight
PO38 1UL
Telephone: 01983 855397
Fax: 01983 856756

Contents

Regulars

Opening Times ..... Facing Page
Curator's Notes ..... Page 2
Chairman's Message ..... Page 4
Editor's Letter ..... Page 5
Planting Profile: New Zealand ..... Page 8
Botanic Gardens at Large ..... Page 23
Weather in the Garden ..... Page 12
Friends' Recipe Swap ..... Page 31

Notice Board

Dates for your Diary .... Facing Page & Page 22
Tour Guides Appeal ..... Page 5
Gardening Volunteers ..... Page 9
Membership Renewal Form ..... Page 16/17
Botanic Garden Forum ..... Page 27
Council Office Garden Rescue ..... Page 30
Membership News ..... Page 32
Patrons ..... Page 32
AGM Date, Time and Venue ..... Page 32
Ways to Renew Membership ..... Page 32
Café Botanique Dates ..... Inside Back

Special Features

Botany Club, Bluebells/Beavers ..... Page 3
Botany Club, Bonchurch ..... Page 6
Memories of the Garden ..... Page 7
Roses of Sissinghurst ..... Page 10
Botany Club, Fungus Foray ..... Page 13
Meet the Chairman: Val Pitts ..... Page 14
Ventnor Method explored ..... Page 18
Rewilding & Ventnor Method ..... Page 20
Visit to RHS Wisley ..... Page 24
50 Years' Tree Planting ..... Page 28
Artist in Residence ..... Page 29

Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society Registered Charity No. 1174751

Printed on the Isle of Wight on 50% recycled paper using vegetable based inks

recycle

Pushing the boundaries

Another summer, another clutch of weather records fall. Across the Island we saw striking flowerings of Oleander *Nerium oleander,* considered too tender less than 30 years ago. At VBG Colin Pope found rare fungi from the USA that require great heat emerging from our woodchips, *Leucoagaricus americanus.* In the walled garden our *Firmiana simplex* is setting seed – a probable first out-of-doors event in the UK. The UK climate is changing quickly and dramatically, our living collection of plants is responding, and we need to expand the scope of them in reaction.

Exotic beauty: Hymenopogon parasiticum
Photograph by Nick Macer

In *"New Trees - Recent Introductions to Cultivation"* by John Grimshaw and Ross Bayton, published 2009, we met many candidates for our Garden. Looking through it now, we already have so many of the taxa suited to Ventnor - *Arbutus xalapensis* on the cover (introduced to VBG 1972), *Buddleja cordata* (introduced to VBG 2009) and *Banksia integrifolia* subsp. *monticola* (introduced VBG 2003). There is already a case for an addendum to be added to this book, perhaps called "Future Trees". It is within this bracket of future trees, the specimens that will be champions in 20 or 30 years time, that we now look.

Beginning Autumn 2022 we are extending the Far Eastern collection of plants at VBG. You will have read of the plan within the Botanic Direction thread of *Ventnorensis.* See *Ventnorensis* Spring/Summer 2021, Page 7, Botanic Direction. This is the largest reclamation of growing space at VBG since the Arid Garden project of 2009. Extending from the margin of the existing Japanese Garden, the project is entitled Further East. We aim to double the accessions from that part of the world, focussing on new introductions from China, Taiwan, Burma, Vietnam, India and Korea. The first of these plants are already in the nursery: Trish has been propagating plants entirely new to UK gardens. Alongside these will be more showy, commercially available stock to add immediacy and structure. New pathways will improve access and a land survey suggests opportunity to extend access for the mobility-impaired. The Japanese Garden will retire in name; this is in recognition of the shift towards botanic horticulture over 'gardenesque' semantics. The Tori gates, bridges and lanterns remain.

The photograph here is a taster of the plants we are bringing to VBG: *Hymenopogon parasiticum:* An exotic beauty found by Nick Macer in North Vietnam, related to *Emmenopterys* etc, with spectacular inflorescences of long tubed, hairy faced, jasmine-scented white flowers in summer, surrounded by long slim white bracts. Extremely rare in cultivation in the UK with exact hardiness not yet established, but has survived unscathed outside in a pot in Gloucestershire at -6˚c so far.

BOTANY CLUB

Bluebells and Beavers

Our informal but informative forays into the natural world

Jewels among oaks: Bridgette and Colin

Bluebell walk

After a wet and miserable morning, the sky cleared as if by magic and we were blessed with a perfect May afternoon for our first post-pandemic walk in America Wood, an area of ancient woodland near Shanklin, with our favourite botanist guide, Colin Pope. We enjoyed bluebells and majestic oaks; we discovered the array of indicator species of this type of woodland and we revelled in the sight of wild cherry blossom against the blue May sky. Then, as a perfect ending, there was tea and cakes at Bridgette's. The world was definitely back on its axis.

Des Res: Ideal beaver home

Beaver habitat

With rewilding a much-discussed topic, we enjoyed a walk with Izzie Tween and her colleagues from the Hampshire & Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, to learn about the proposed reintroduction of beavers to the Island. We set off through Martin's Wood to the Newchurch Moors Nature Reserve to view the area of ponds and shrubby willow vegetation which would make the perfect home for these furry engineers to take up residence and commence their water-management activities. We heard about the beneficial effects they can have on river flow and water quality and how other wildlife can benefit from their presence. At the same time, possible downsides of their activities and ways of mitigating any such effects were discussed. Our guides were enthusiastic and informative. It was a lovely walk in an area otherwise the preserve of local anglers, and preceded a wonderful Café Botanique talk by Izzie in the autumn.

Wild enthusiasm: Izzy Tween of HIWWT

Chairman's Message

It has been an eventful summer since I was elected Chairman at the AGM, and I choose that word carefully because, with the Covid restrictions behind us, our Events group, ably led by Sally Peake, has been very busy indeed organising visits, walks and talks for our Members, covered in this edition. We look forward to many more next year. The efforts of the Plant Sales team has provided a valuable contribution to our funds. Another significant event was the planting of the 50th Anniversary Palm which the Friends donated, when High Sheriff Kay Marriott praised the contribution of the Friends and Volunteers, which was good to hear.

We continue to support the Garden Volunteers through Rosemary Stewart maintaining a communications channel, by organising occasional get-togethers including the monthly soup lunches, and by funding Trish Brenchley to work in the Garden with the Volunteers, on top of much more gardening besides. There are no apprentices at present for her to mentor, but we keep the links with IOW College going in the interim through Sally's activities, and we continue to sponsor two annual prizes for their horticulture apprentices [see Page 27]. We also maintain links with the Isle of Wight Volunteer Centre. I am pleased that we are building links with Ventnor Town, and, further afield, with other botanic gardens through the Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum. [See Pages 27 & 30]

Of course, it has been a summer of VBG in the headlines, and far beyond Ventnor there is now much discussion around themes of rewilding, sustainability, biodiversity and the role of gardeners and gardens, including from our Patron Alan Titchmarsh offering his interesting and balanced views in defence of 'gardening' in several articles we have seen recently. It is good that the debates that have developed are having an effect on the appearance of the Garden and particularly good to see Simon Goodenough's gullied and rock-strewn interpretation of a Mediterranean landscape re-emerging from the domination of a few thug species through the concerted efforts of the substitute 'keystone species' aka Gardeners [see David Pearce, Page 18]. We too have ideas for a new Friends' project that would renovate a neglected but lovely 'secret' part of this area of the Garden: a project that links to its heritage, would encourage exploration - which children in particular love - and provide a beautiful place to sit for quiet reflection. Plans are at a very early stage, but watch this space.

Finally, ever since VBG annual passes have been called Garden Membership, there has been some confusion with people buying those thinking they were joining the Friends, and *vice versa.* Many of you are both annual pass holders AND members of the Friends' Society, of course. Please remember that as Members of our Friends' Charity, **you have a say in how we operate,** with rights to question what we are doing, to call meetings if you wish, and to vote. In addition, we can claim the enhancement of Gift Aid on our Membership Fees, which a company cannot do. There will be an AGM as usual next spring but if you have any questions or ideas at any time, please do get in touch. We will continue to work for what is best for the Garden, as the Friends have for 35 years. We really value and fervently hope for your continued support.

I would like to thank my fellow committee members for their steadfast support and to wish you all a very happy New Year season, as we all look forward to a new gardening year.

Val Pitts - vbgfs.chairman@gmail.com

Dear members . . .

As a journalist I tend to think if I'm wondering about something, other people will be too. So all the letters and articles about VBG that have been in the press this summer make me want to look at the whys and wherefores. The issues raised in particular were about the Ventnor Method and about the status of VBG as a botanic garden. Therefore I asked one of the most vociferous contributors to the debate of the Ventnor Method, David Pearce for an article, and asked our curator Chris Kidd to write about the way this, and the trend for rewilding in general, fits into the day-to-day gardening at VBG. [See Pages 18 & 20]

Then I wondered what exactly is the definition of a botanic garden. As I said, if as a lay person I wonder, I'm sure others will too. The answer is rather like the length of a piece of string, but an article by historian Sharon Willoughby of Kew Gardens gives strong pointers and explains how the term has changed with the times. [See Page 24]

You will see from my interview with our Chairman, Val Pitts [Page 14], that the Friends have not felt able to support some recent proposals by the CIC. Our pages reflect the developments taking place to keep everyone in the picture.

Meanwhile the life of the Friends carries on, as we enjoy everything to do with nature. Thanks to Sally's tireless efforts we have been able to offer lovely trips such as that to Wisley, and, next year to Thenford [see Page 22]. With Botany Club we have been to Friends' gardens, visited woods of bluebells and - hopefully - beavers, and to find fungi [see Pages 3, 6 & 13]. With Café Botanique we have heard the secrets of rose growing at Sissinghurst [Page 10]. learned about bonsai and most recently dahlias. As we volunteer, we have shared tasty cakes and warming soup [see Soup Swap, Page 31].

As always, many thanks to Rosemary Stewart who keeps us all informed via her lively newsletters about all the activities on offer, and for casting a meticulous eye over the proofs of this magazine.

Please submit articles for the Spring edition by March 24th.

Tour Guides

We are looking now for new Tour Guides for next year, so that we can meet and train them for the spring. Knowledge of the history and plants has only to be basic, just to make the Garden of more interest to the visitors and promote Ventnor Botanic Garden. Support will be given and potential guides need only take on a tour when they feel confident. Information on the Garden will be provided and a chance to shadow other guides. It is a rewarding and gratifying volunteer position and the rota is flexible to suit everyone.

Anyone interested please ring Jonyth on tel: 01983 730532 so we can meet for coffee and answer any queries.

BOTANY CLUB

An Afternoon in Bonchurch

In August we were privileged to visit the gardens of both **Judi Lines** and **Charlotte Walby.** It was a very hot afternoon but despite this the event was well attended.

Ashcliff: garden with stunning views

The tour started at Judi's house, Ashcliff, a lovely garden with stunning sea views. Judi gave us a guided tour of the garden and was very willing to answer all our questions. It was a pleasure to be able to see all the different parts of this garden with its cliff backdrop. There was a wide variety of plants to see, and Judi very generously offered bulbs to everyone who wanted some.

We then moved on to Charlotte's house, Elcombe, another beautiful garden. We were treated to a demonstration first of all the different types of pots used in Penjing.

Penjing originates in China, whereas Bonsai is from Japan. Charlotte then showed us the best way to prepare a pot for planting. We then moved into the garden where she had put some magnificent plants on display.

Charlotte Walby: How to prepare a pot for planting

Hands off the cake! Afternoon tea in the garden

We concluded the day with a very welcome afternoon tea (cakes provided by VBGFS).

All in all a great afternoon was had by all, despite the extreme heat.

September – Due to bad weather the Bat Walk was cancelled

50 Years a Friend - *and some things have changed*

In our 50 years of VBG series, **Steve Newberry** tries recreating THEN

At the beginning of July 1972 I returned from a one-year work assignment in Amsterdam for a well-earned rest on the Island. After a sunny day at Steephill Cove we checked out the brand-new Pleasure Gardens which had replaced the spooky derelict ruins of the old Royal National Hospital.

July 1972 Rose Garden with Garden Tavern. Postcard: WJ Nigh & Sons

The rose gardens around the pond outside the Garden Tavern were a gorgeous technicolor dream, and are caught wonderfully in the Nigh postcard. I posed on the grassy bank by the coastal path, and then took a reverse view from the rose garden looking back up the hill.

Five decades on and it is now July 2022. The High Sheriff has just planted a tree to commemorate the Garden's 50th anniversary [see Page 28]. As long term Friends of the Garden, we regularly visit the now Ventnor Botanic Garden and most weeks join the happy band of volunteers to help the hard-working staff with maintenance, weeding, watering and planting.

2022 Picnic tables with Visitor Centre

We thought it would be fun to re-take these old pictures. But of course nothing ever stays the same. The Garden has evolved botanically and it was impossible. The hillside is now populated by a dense growth of trees, the rose garden is replaced by picnic tables and a large fig tree and hedge blocks the view . . . though it's still just about possible to make out the location of the steps which used to lead up to the rose garden. So much for nostalgia!

July 1972 Pond and Beyond

2022 Pond and Fig Tree/Hedge

Footnote

I scanned my 50-year-old photos from the original Kodachrome colour slides which were taken on a very basic SLR camera; no autofocus or exposure meters back in the day! You used to get 36 exposures on a 35mm film - and later in the film I found the snaps I took of my sister's wedding, in the same month. This has been a special summer for Golden celebrations.

2022 View from Coastal Path

1972 Steve by Coastal Path

PLANTING PROFILE

Garden Planning

By **Chris Kidd, Curator**

The next of a series of articles showing the Friends the guiding documentation for the future of this Garden's plant collection, area by area. The actual document behind this is fairly bleak and minimal, taking function over form, so I've tried to lubricate it rather: I'm sure you'll get the gist. As with all plans, these may be aspirational and subject to change. It's worth bearing in mind that I've not seen a single planning document from the Hillier era - or the council era for that matter. Both were concerned with the melody, intrigue and beauty of populating these remarkable acres with rare and exotic plants. In some areas we shoehorned some of Hillier's collection into the semblance of a modern botanic garden layout, in doing so we lost integrity, but prior to our development of New Zealand there was simply a lawn and nothing of note to remove.

New Zealand

SETTING

Created starting 1987 in an area which Hillier referred to in his enigmatic style as "M". This is one of the few truly flat areas of VBG, having originally been the grass tennis courts of the old hospital. Some of the residual yew hedge that surrounded the court has grown to full size on the south side. The area was within part of the wooded grounds of the RNH and had a tennis hut at the western end. Odd, unhappy and poor specimen trees were planted within the lawn. Also a few moribund trees and unpleasant shrubs skulked beneath *Cupresses macrocarpa* monsters that fell, mercifully, during the storm of '87. These stumps were removed in impressive style during a clearup that took a calendar year.

New Zealand : Constituents of the wild

DEVELOPMENT

This section was the first opportunity to begin reinventing not just this Botanic Garden, but botanic gardens generically. Hitherto botanic plant collections were shown as individual constituents of the wild, rather than imitations of the wild. This crossover had gained traction at Wakehurst Place, with the Tony Schilling recreation of a Himalayan valley utilising naturally collected trees. The development at VBG of New Zealand utilised trees, shrubs and climbers, positioned as companions in the same makeup as their original collections by the Goodenoughs in New Zealand.

Note that 'gardenesque' features, such as lawn and tennis hut remain; the horticultural presentation is still shown as crossover with old practice melding into the new direction. Within 10 years the collection was internationally recognised as the finest representation of the New Zealand flora in the northern hemisphere. Today it stands as a historic bookmark of one of the boldest sea changes in plant collection display from the UK 20th century.

BOTANIC DIRECTION

It is long recognised that from a historic perspective there is little at VBG, the Garden is still young, and archive plants from a Victorian era are few. Some of the paths are Grade II listed. Even the Palm Garden, with the oldest *Trachycarpus fortunei* still alive is set in a contemporary garden layout. Recognition of this freedom from tradition permitted the reinvention of the Garden following the freeze of '86 and storm of '87. Erasing "stamp collection" planting from the 1970s happened beside the New Zealand experiment, which in turn led to the Ventnor Method [see Page 19]. In this context, it will be important to retain the essence of what the original 1987 New Zealand Garden grew into. This New Zealand Garden is now a historic artefact and so attempts should be made to conserve it, not modernise it. The number of original taxa is now low, lower than the day it was planted, because the plants have grown. This is the natural process of succession that happens in the wild (and in gardens) as plants grow – there simply isn't enough room. The march towards the climax vegetation of woody trees and shrubs can ultimately create new mini ecosystems that potentially contain flora (and fauna) unthinkable or impossible at outset.

Today, the taxa number is now even lower than when New Zealand Garden was at its peak in the 1990s, a continuation of the process described above. The potential understorey ecosystem is in place, but bereft of the taxa one would find inhabiting the niche in New Zealand – these taxa are just not in cultivation. Therefore an approach has been taken to limit the succession of the plant community with regular and steady clearance and replanting. This is undertaken discreetly, and sectionally. The overall finish of this area should be that of its height in 1996, complete with lawn and tennis hut, cut edges, labels, and woodchipped paths. It is a first draft of the style that would follow.

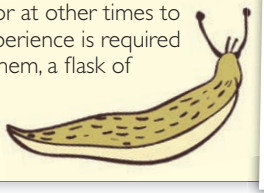
Prior to the Goodenoughs, botanic gardens only interpreted the wild in various ways; the point, however, was to recreate it.

[See Planting Profile, Ventnorensis Spring/Summer 2021 Page 6/7].

Gardening Volunteers

Help is always required in the Garden and we warmly welcome new recruits to work with the Garden staff and existing volunteers, either in our friendly group on a Wednesday morning or at other times to be arranged. No qualifications or previous experience is required – just bring your own hand tools if you have them, a flask of refreshment and wear sensible clothing.

For further information on Garden volunteering, please phone Bridgette Sibbick - 867739



Roses of Sissinghurst By Michelle Cain

Sissinghurst is the epitome of the quintessential English garden, created from 1930 by the poet, novelist and garden writer, Vita Sackville-West and her husband, diplomat and writer Harold Nicolson.

Unable to inherit her family home, Knole House, due to the laws of primogeniture dictating only men could inherit property, Vita found in Sissinghurst a faded replacement for the grandeur of her former palladian residence. It might sound odd that she bought the fragmented ruin of an Elizabethan mansion, practically derelict and unpractical to live in, but Vita was a romanticist, with visions of possibility. Among the disjoined layout of the remaining buildings, Harold skilfully imposed his template of a design for the garden, a series of rooms or escapes, characterised by long vistas flanked by stark formality of yew or box hedging, featuring statues and antiquities at their end points, many plundered from trips to far-flung places. The beds within each room allowed Vita to experiment with plants, 'cramming into every chink and cranny', creating its beauty and abundant quality. Its enduring success is much indebted to this juxtaposition between formality and informality and Vita once described her approach as "profusion, even extravagance and exuberance, within confines of the utmost linear severity."

The garden was never intended to be more than a private refuge, but over time, Vita's name became synonymous with a way of gardening and planting to which many people still aspire: a significant characteristic of this were old roses. Her collection quickly outgrew the famous White Garden, moving into the then kitchen garden. The Rose Garden, as it is now known, is one of the largest garden rooms at Sissinghurst, enabling Vita to amass up to three hundred different cultivars.

Although old roses enjoyed a renaissance in the post-war years of the 1950s, thanks to Graham Stuart-Thomas promoting them as a benchmark of good taste, most people in the mid 20th century were growing modern hybrid teas in neat beds exclusively of roses, with bare soil and no under-planting. Vita couldn't abide such passionless planting, urging her Observer readers to give old roses a try:

> *"I know also that most of them suffer from the serious drawback of flowering only once during a season, but what incomparable lavishness they give, while they are about it. There is nothing scrimpy or stingy about them. They have a generosity which is as desirable in plants as in people" and "anyone who falls under the charm of the old roses will seldom find his heart amongst the newer ones again."*

An old rose is simply one in cultivation before 1867, when "La France", the first rose classed as a hybrid tea and considered to be the birth of the modern rose was introduced. They fall loosely into two groups: the first is once flowering, which are of European origin and consist of the Gallica, Damask, Alba, Boursalt, Centifolia and Moss roses. With one or two exceptions, they only flower during the early summer. Many are highly fragrant and all full of character, and extremely tough. The second group all originate from the China Rose, introduced to Europe in the 18th century where they were crossed with the original old roses to produce a group of repeat flowerers, which includes the Portland, Bourbon, Noisette, Hybrid Perpetual, and Tea.

At Sissinghurst, the roses are pruned and trained using techniques perfected by successions of highly skilled gardeners, passing to the next generation their craft – stem bending.

Plants grow and increase via growth hormones pushing outwards in apical dominance, whereby the tip shoot dominates over axillary buds below. Applying this to roses, if a stem is vertical, the apex shoot will dominate, firstly producing vegetative growth, followed by a flowering spur. Bending a stem in an arc shape means more of the axillary buds point up towards the light, increasing the surface area for photosynthesis, and most importantly, initiating flowering all along the length of the stem. So instead of one long stem with, perhaps, one or two spurs at the end, many shorter spurs are produced, each covered in flowers. Many of the old roses, such as Ispahan, send out long shoots, which suit being trained in this way, encouraging prolific flowers, preventing the stems flopping due to the weight of the blooms and bringing them down to eye-level.

This method, sometimes known as pegging, originated at Cliveden with Jack Vass, who came to Sissinghurst in 1939. Initially sceptical, Vita referred to the structures as "lobster pots", but later wrote: "The roses . . . are all grown on one principle. Three, four, or five strong wooden stakes according to need are driven into the ground around each bush, and the long shoots are then trained down and round the stakes, forming a kind of cage or lattice."

To further explain, these structures can either be shaped as domes of roses, where three of four bent poles of hazel are driven into the ground, the rose shoots being bent over and tied onto the structure, or as columns where roses are bent around and tied onto four vertical hazel poles. A large part of the gardeners' winter work involves coppicing huge quantities of hazel, for poles or pea sticks and later herbaceous staking.

As well as domes and columns, some roses are grown up long chestnut poles to achieve height within beds, whilst other cultivars - less flexible, brittle or having previously not responded well to bending techniques - are pruned in the traditional cup-shaped way. Every rose is mapped, observed and noted, a guide for the following year's pruning.

Rose bending becomes especially effective with climbers and ramblers, many of which are trained on the remaining red brick walls of the Sissinghurst ruin. Everybody knows the classic fan-shape of a climbing wall rose, trained in the traditional way. "No crossing stems," the books all say! Having spent my prior rose pruning years removing mature roses from walls, uncrossing stems and tying them back again, even as Head Gardener I had to put aside my penchant for things to be just so. I now consider myself to be enlightened, and I cross stems to my heart's content.

The maxim for pruning and training a climbing wall rose at Sissinghurst is that it should end up looking like a carpet beater. If it's a rambler, it should resemble a psychedelic or hippy dance - an image which might sound off the wall (excuse the pun) but helps the gardeners visualise their aims. The results: walls filled with flowers from bottom to top.

My personal tip for successful rose growing is never to tie them with wire or plastic. Stems tied with wire almost always die or dieback. Always use garden twine to tie rose stems onto wire, making sure that the string sits between the wire and the rose stem, thus protecting it.

Weather in the Garden

(April to September 2022) **by Chris Watts**

A theory shattered!

The summer was dry, hot and sunny. When my interest in the weather first took hold, way back in the 1960s, I seem to remember the theory about good summers was that they ran in cycles. One of the simplest of these was that summers in odd numbered years were generally better than those in even numbered. Of course, 1976 tested that theory somewhat; what 2022 has now done is to provide an exception to the rule which may shatter the theory for good! Has climate change really altered the picture for ever?

Just look at the number of wet days in the table below, only 41 out of a possible 183. Look at the rain, four months well below average; even the fifth month, August, could be counted as mainly dry as 90 per cent of the total rain was associated with thunder on just two days, the 17th and 24th. September bucked the trend, becoming the first month of this year to record both above average rainfall and number of days with rain. And looking at the temperatures, all months are above average. Not departing slightly from average, but noticeably from average.

This six month period began on the cold side, with overnight temperatures near freezing and a wintry shower on the 1st April. Other than the information in the table below, there was little to note until July. The 19th saw exceptional heat on the mainland where record temperatures soared to around 40°C, but in the Garden the influence of the sea kept the temperature lower by 10 degrees, the maximum on that day being 30.5°C. This was not a record here – as recently as August 2020 two days were higher. And it was not to be the highest this year, for on August 11th 30.6°C was recorded. But what was unusual about the 19th July was the overnight minimum of 23.5°C; previous to this the highest I could find was 22.8°C on the 29th July 1948! Three more tropical nights came on the 12th – 14th August. Shortly afterwards on the 17th, a thunderstorm dropped 30.9mm of rain in 50 minutes starting at 5.10pm. Throughout this period thunder was observed on 15 days, greater than average, and interestingly St Catherine's lighthouse took a direct hit in the early hours of May 16th.

	Mean Temp °C	Rain mm	Wet Days (1+ mm)	Soil Temp °C 1ft depth	[1]	[2]	[3]
April	10.6++	30.4----	8	11.4	0	13.4	7
May	13.8++	37.4----	8	16.2	0	12.5	8
June	16.6++	29.5----	6	18.6	14	6.9	8
July	19.6++	1.7----	1	21.5	30	1.2	20
August	20.3++	62.1++	6	21.4	30	38.3	14
September	16.2+	92.7++	12	17.5	12	19.2	7

[1] No of days over 20°C [2] Wettest day rain total in mm [3] Longest spell (in days) without rain

BOTANY CLUB

Fungi Foray in Firestone Copse

October found us foraging - and what finds we found!

This Fungi Foray was led by Colin Pope. On our arrival the rain was falling but stopped just in time for our walk. This was another well-attended event and we were lucky to find a large variety of toadstools and mushrooms. Colin gave us a safety talk about edible fungi and then we set off.

Colin's enthusiasm was infectious and we were all soon spotting fungi once we had 'got our eye in'.

Seeking and finding: October's outing

Bolete, Boletus cisalpinus

A group of Inkcaps or Coprinus

Milkcap or Lactarius

Colin reports: The threat of heavy rain did not really materialise and we had reasonable weather for our fungus foray in Firestone Copse. We walked down the main ride before turning off on a side path to reach the pond, observing fungi as we went. There were plenty of fungi to see although not as large a range of species as I had hoped for. Brittle-gills *(Russula)*, Milkcaps *(Lactarius)* and Webcaps *(Inocybe)* species were prevalent. Amongst the more notable species we found were The Blusher *(Amanita rubescens)*, a large amanita which bruises red, the peculiar-looking White Saddle *(Helvella crispa)* and the highly poisonous Death Cap *(Amanita phalloides)*. We finished by looking beneath some conifers and old oaks near the carpark where we found a different selection of fungi. There were remarkable quantities of the Blackening Russula *(Russula nigricans)* and we also found Puffballs *(Lycoperdon perlatum)* and The Deceiver *(Laccaria laccata)* so called because of its extremely variable size, colour, stature and habitat.

White Saddle or Helvella crispa

Taking on the challenge

Val Pitts was appointed VBGFS Chairman at the last AGM. Life is full of surprises, as she tells **Roz Whistance**

Magical place: Val in the Garden

"No ambition, no plan," says Val Pitts as we chat by the pond outside the *edulis* restaurant. "But sometimes things happen and you take on the challenge."

Val is talking about taking on the chairmanship of the Friends' Society, but in fact that sums up her life to date. Not carefully planned but taking opportunities and finding achievements - and enjoyment - in all the areas life has taken her.

"I've never been one of those people who knew exactly where they wanted to be in five years' time," she smiles.

She grew up in Loughborough, in the East Midlands. "We lived right on the edge of town, and across the road was the canal. We'd cross the canal bridge and we were in the open country. Then, kids went out to play and came home at teatime." Being outside fostered a love of plants in Val. "The Nature Table and the Nature Walks at junior school were just very much my thing. I had a huge collection of pressed flowers."

It was no surprise then that her choice of degree at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne was Botany, and she loved the field trips in and around Northumberland. "It's a fabulous county. If I wasn't here I'd like to be in Northumberland."

When she married her first husband they moved to London, and Val taught at the College of Further Education in Woolwich. They settled in the Thames Valley, and though children intervened she was never far from the botanic world, among other things writing abstracts for horticultural journals for the Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux. "All the time I was doing more and more gardening. So although botany had taken a back seat, gardening never did." She adds: "It never does."

During the child raising interlude, Val's involvement in voluntary organisations alerted her to the wonderful challenges of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme. Unsurprisingly to those who know her, she was soon running the scheme in her local area. "I was the Field Officer for the Maidenhead and Windsor area, promoting and running the scheme. Then when I went back to work, I had a group at the school. That was a really interesting and enjoyable time, with several Palace presentations, meeting the Duke of Edinburgh, things like that, on top of the challenges and pleasures of helping the young people to achieve their Awards."

Adventurer: in the Pindus mountains as DoE Field Officer

A highlight for Val was helping to organise a DoE Gold-Award three-week exchange trip to Greece, including an expedition to the Pindus mountains. A return trip brought their Greek counterparts to explore Snowdonia and the New Forest. "My involvement with the Scheme comes back to the love of being outdoors. It's nice to share that with people."

Her return to work wasn't to teaching but, after a librarian qualification, to running the library - "Though we called it the Learning Resource Centre," she smiles.

Friends: Val with her beloved collies

So why the leap from the Thames Valley to the Isle of Wight? "My husband Bob was born on the Island and brought up in Ventnor - so I'm claiming nationality through marriage! On trips here we'd talk about the ideal place 'if'. Then a bungalow came up in exactly that place - and we were straight on the ferry."

It was, she admits, the most ridiculous time to move. "Bob had just been appointed Mayor of Wokingham Borough!" Fortunately for Wokingham it took a while to sell their house - "so it was only for a few months that he was a commuting Mayor."

Once Val and Bob were installed in Bonchurch Val gravitated to Ventnor Botanic Garden. "There is something quite magical about the Garden," she says. "I was a volunteer, then joined the Friends, and when they wanted a membership secretary I thought 'I could do that job.'"

And now here she is as Chairman. "It was clear John [Bagshawe] needed to step down, he'd had a very trying three years. When he suggested it to me, one of our beloved collies had recently died and my sister had also just passed away, so I wasn't in the best place. But clearly somebody needed to take on the role. A deciding factor was Michelle Cain's presence as liaison person between the CIC and the Friends. [The relationship] hasn't been easy over past years, but with Michelle we had someone who had clear ideas about what needed to be done in the Garden and how we could cooperate. So with that I thought let's give it a go and see if we can take it forward."

Michelle Cain had been appointed head gardener [*Ventnorensis*, Spring 2022]. "Michelle had set about fixing things from the bottom up. She believed that any new 'quick fix' planting should be secondary to the basic task of 'tackling the wilderness' because it took time and resources away from that essential process: this chimed with the thinking of the Friends' committee. So we came up with some shared ideas for a few modest projects which we could support, to improve the aesthetic appeal of some areas and draw on the heritage of the Garden. From the Friends' perspective, Michelle's departure is a sad loss to VBG.

"Then, of course we have had a summer with VBG in the spotlight following Simon Goodenough's surprising but powerful letter to the *County Press*, which took the debate about the Ventnor Method far and wide, with the various intertwined issues of sustainability, and rewilding. [See David Pearce Pages 18 & 19, Chris Kidd Pages 20 & 21].

Continues on Page 21

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL*

*Delete as appropriate

CIO number 1174751

Please send the completed form to: VBGFS Membership Secretary Mrs. Anne Hornett, 63 West Hill Road, Ryde, Isle of Wight PO33 1LG

Title:	First Name:	Surname:
.....	.....	.....

Address:

E-Mail: Telephone:

Second Member at the same address:

Junior Member/ (under 18) & dates/s of birth

Membership Rates **Membership year runs from 1st Jan to 31st December**

Individual	2nd at same address	Junior – under 18	Non UK
£20.00	£10.00	£2.00	£20.00
New Members after 1st July pay reduced rates in the first year:			
£10.00	£5.00	£1.00	£10.00

Individual Membership £
2nd Member at same address £
Junior Member/s £
Non UK Member £
Optional Donation £_____

TOTAL: £_____

Signature: Date:

DATA PROTECTION: By ticking this box I/we give consent for the VBGFS to hold my/our personal information and understand that they may contact me/us by email, telephone or post with information about my/our membership and other activities organised by VBGFS. The information will be securely held and not shared with any other organisation. I/We may ask to see a copy of the Privacy Policy at any time. Please tick ☐

organisation. I/We may ask to see a copy of the Privacy Policy at any time. Please tick ☐

Gift Aid it: By completing this Gift Aid declaration you enable Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society to claim tax back from the Government at no cost to yourself.
I/We would like Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society to reclaim tax on any eligible membership subscriptions or donations made by me/us until further notice.

My/Our details are:

First Name ..... Surname .....

First Name ..... Surname .....

House name/number Postcode.....

Please be aware that you must have paid an amount of income and/or capital gains tax at least equal to the amount of tax reclaimed by all charities and Community Amateur Sports Clubs on all your donations in the tax year (6th April one year to 5th April the next)

WAYS TO PAY – please tick your choice (membership cards will be issued on receipt of payment)

1. **STANDING ORDER** ☐
   Please arrange with your bank to pay the appropriate membership fee immediately and then every succeeding **January 6th** until further notice
2. **BACS** ☐
3. **CHEQUE** ☐
   Please make out to **Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends** and enclose with this Membership form

BANK DETAILS FOR OPTIONS 1 AND 2

Account: Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends Sort Code: 54-41-31 Account number: 49647717
Reference: Your Surname and Postcode

Queries to: Anne Hornett annehornett.gardens@gmail.com 07958 114019

‘The Ventnor Method’ explored

David Pearce, former apprentice with VBG, gardener for the King at Highgrove and now newly appointed curator of Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens, speaks out

The mission of a functioning botanic garden can be whittled down to three core objectives; education, inspiration, and conservation. The plants represented in botanic gardens are highly diverse, they are often wild-collected, up to 50 per cent in some cases. These wild collections provide an important form of ex-situ conservation, and are often used to tell stories, educate and inspire, whilst being used in research, herbaria, and reintroduction projects.

One could ask; does ‘The Ventnor Method’ contribute to these objectives? Under the ‘Visit the Garden’ section of the Ventnor Botanic Garden (VBG) website, is the CIC’s ‘Approach in a Nutshell’ regarding ‘The Ventnor Method’:

Information: VBG’s blackboard

“We present plants in association with each other as they would be in the wild. At first glance, the garden might seem untidy, but our plant collection is left to thrive naturally for a reason. In nature, plants exist in self-maintaining communities that often have highly appreciable aesthetic merit while making a wonderful habitat for small birds and mammals, providing both shelter and a source of food. We have stimulated this in cultivation and have allowed plant communities to develop and self-regulate naturally.”

To appear relevant and marketable, it appears that ‘The Ventnor Method’ is attempting to fit within the aesthetically exciting ‘naturalistic’ design and ‘rewilding’ trends, which, over the past two-to-three years, have become especially present in the garden and land management sectors. The irony of this is that in its so-called journey towards ‘self-maintaining communities’ the Garden has, in fact, been distanced from the highly diverse, naturalistic, idealised depictions of biodiversity hotspots which were originally conceptualised at Ventnor by former curator Simon Goodenough.

It would take hundreds of pages to even begin to share with you some of the complexity of ecology. Ecosystems vary greatly, with some habitats, such as wildflower meadows, being quite simple to restore. With good practice and some nutrient-poor soil, one can typically restore land to diverse, native wildflower meadow within 5-10 years. Equally, there are biodiversity hotspots around the world, for example the western cape of South Africa, that represent such highly complex ecosystems, which have been established over millions of years and of which we only understand a slither of the incredibly complex interactions that maintain its biodiversity.

In the large-land management context of rewilding, 'keystone' herbivores are used to control the dominant species. Have you ever wondered why most weeds are edible? Rather than putting energy into making themselves inedible, they choose to be edible but grow at a very fast rate, and with high tolerance to herbivory. In a garden, the role of the keystone species is assumed by the loving gardener, who must maintain the balance. Once we kill the keystone species, the apex predators, and build motorways that block migration routes, we cannot simply expect an ecosystem to recover. To assume a garden on the Isle of Wight can simply be neglected and form a 'self-maintaining community' of plants shows a complete lack of understanding of basic ecology.

This statement refers to The Ventnor Method being 'untidy'. This is a dreadful, subjective term. Some of the world's gardens most known for their beauty are anything but 'tidy'. Renowned landscape architect Piet Oudolf, has over the past couple of decades wowed the world by creating naturalistic planting that provides a melancholic and immersive effect through the 'untidiness' of seed heads and architectural stems. If untidiness is ugly, that is not the fault of nature, but of the keepers.

There is no doubt or debate that VBG's attempt at rewilding has dramatically lessened the floral biodiversity of the Garden. Logically, this extends to all other levels of the ecosystem (but not its 'small birds and mammals, apparently). As VBG will continue, through neglect, to lose diversity in favour of dominant 'generalist' and pioneer species, e.g. *Echium pininana,* so will the diversity of habitats and food decrease for the small birds and mammals. The paper by Majewska *et al* (2018), *Planting gardens to support insect biodiversity*, found that plant species diversity directly affects insect diversity. Unfortunately, during 2016 – 2018 at VBG, the considerable amount of knapsack spraying with glyphosate we were directed to carry out, deemed essential as the only way of gardening with limited resources, would have further impacted insect biodiversity.

This debate is not one of the new vs the old, innovation vs tradition. It is a debate about whether the Garden is practising what it preaches, or is it a green-washing smoke-screen used to try and excuse poor investment? The CIC's explanation of 'The Ventnor Method' actually sits more aligned with the style of ecological horticulture used under the curation of Simon Goodenough, before the practices of the past decade. Ecology does not, quite simply, work as the CIC likes to believe it does. The only ecosystem that will ever be created at VBG, under its current programme, is one of the British Isles, most likely similar to the mixed broad-leafed woodland of the rest of the undercliff. This is the inevitable destiny for the 'Botanic Garden' without dramatic reform.

Untidy?: Piet's Oudolf's personal garden in Hummelo (Oudolf, 2016)

The Wild and Rewilding

Chris Kidd on the thinking behind current experiments at VBG

The wild is an interesting concept. Thirty years ago Professor Gren Lucas, Deputy Director of Kew and Keeper of the Herbarium, suggested it no longer exists, and that that isn't necessarily a bad thing. It sounded alarming at the time, especially from a man with some radical thoughts on giant panda conservation. To explain, Lucas argued that all of our planet's surface is now managed in some way, however light or bad that may be. He contended that if our species worked harder at that management, we could do much to improve the onward viability of our world.

In the above context, rewilding is an interesting idea. What does one rewild to, if the wild no longer exists? Does our species select an arbitrary date? Say, prior to the industrial revolution? Or a period of mean climatic stability within the immediate post glaciation? What plant range should we choose? That which grew 100,000 or 10,000 years ago? What of anthropomorphic climate change? What if we do nothing? Conceptually, rewilding has amazing scope for academic study, but to a wider audience what does it mean? Rewilding is a word that has gained popularity to describe a wide range of approaches to planting or land management in recent years in the developed world. There isn't really yet a peer reviewed condensed definition, or aim of achievement, but maybe we can achieve a consensus that probably planting anything where there hasn't been anything before, except perhaps in the aseptic conditions of an operating theatre, can only be a good thing, no?

Imitating the wild in gardens is no new idea. Gardening books are full of it. Literally. Rather than do it all again, we decided to try new things. VBG is a new garden, finding the role of a botanic garden in the 21st century.

In the Miyawaki technique, various native species of plants are planted close to each other so that they receive sunlight only from the top and grow upwards rather than sideways. As a result, the plantation becomes approximately 30 times denser, grows 10 times faster and becomes maintenance-free after a span of three years. This study was in an urban environment. At VBG we decided to experiment with a variation of the Miyawaki technique. With the name Fast Forest, we have enclosed an area and planted it with small trees and shrubs at high density to monitor how it grows. In doing so we are participating in the game, and will have an outcome to describe. The gardeners coined the name Miyagi Garden for the effort, in honour of the character played by Pat Morita in the Karate Kid film franchise.

To the east of VBG is an area of lawn where we have stopped mowing. In response, we've noticed regeneration of Sweet Chestnut *Castanea sativa* and Evergreen Oak *Quercus ilex*. We've decided to augment this with plantings of Strawberry Tree *Arbutus unedo* and Cork Oak *Quercus suber*. Conceptually, these species aren't a million miles away from the components of lost forests of the Mediterranean, not too far from the climate we have here near Ventnor. In doing so we are participating in the game, and will have an outcome to describe. The gardeners have yet to coin a name for this experiment.

In our Mediterranean Garden is the earliest experiment with what has become known as the Ventnor Method. It is here that 22 years ago we matched the climate of the undercliff with plants from the ecosystems of the Old World Northern Hemisphere Mediterranean floras, including those from Macaronesia. The concept is simple, and visualised by horticulturalist Peter Thoday as an example of where balance between genetic predisposition, climate and horticulture is achieved where horticulture is reduced. (A bit like the "wild".) In doing so we are participating in the game, and will have an outcome to describe. The gardeners have yet to coin a name for this experiment, but just about everyone else has had plenty to say.

Continued from Page 15

Taking on the Challenge

So Val is clear-eyed about the further complications of the role she has taken on. "There needs to be a reset between the Friends and the CIC. VBGFS is an independent charity, the object of which is to support the Botanic Garden, and constitutionally we cannot simply rubber-stamp things that are presented to us without consultation. As Trustees of a charity we are bound to ensure charity law is obeyed, which demands prudent spending of charitable funds."

Val sees much more potential for education in the Garden. Education in the broadest sense is fundamental to any botanic garden [see What is a Botanic Garden? Page 24] and is an object of the charity. The successful Café Botanique talks and walks are part of that [see Pages 3, 6 & 13]. Val cites the apprenticeship scheme as a great example of how the Friends' charitable status directly benefitted the Garden - a charity being able to claim 25 per cent of an optional donation back from the Government - so giving young people opportunities in horticulture. "It was an optional donation, which paid for extra gardeners, too. It started cooperatively, with the CIC and Sally working it out, but what was a donation for the apprenticeships is now just part of the entry price."

There used to be an education officer and programme under the Council, Val recalls, adding: "I think it's a lost opportunity to generate revenue too. It seems you can't bring up children without coffee these days, so get the mothers and toddlers in here! Let them get mucky. There's a new generation of people interested in gardening, but without the experience. Why not have classes for them? It would have to be cooperative - the Friends can support but we are not the employers. There is lots that could be done if there was the will."

Lack of information in the Garden is something Val would love to address: she draws a comparison between the Garden and Brading Roman Villa. "Without the interpretation signs, it would be a pile of old stones and pretty pictures on the floor!" She says she and other volunteers are often asked by visitors for information about the plants and trees, and even help with finding their way around.

A couple approach us and ask for directions, and Val explains, clearly and helpfully, the easiest way. It is the perfect example, at a basic level, of the way she would love to have the opportunity to give more help to the Garden and to share her love of plants and the outdoor world with its visitors.

Off the Island!

Sally Peake on a memorable trip to RHS Garden Wisley

For many of us, this was the first non-essential trip off the Island since fears arising from the Covid pandemic had subsided, so it was an excited group of Islanders who gathered at Ryde Hover Terminal to start a journey to RHS Wisley, the wonderful home of the Royal Horticultural Society, based in the Surrey countryside.

Hoofing it: Walking stops to gather by 'Still Water', Nic Fiddian Green's horse head sculpture at Battlestone Hill

Arriving after just over an hour by coach from Southsea, the large group was quickly split into three smaller tours for an interesting introductory walk around the Garden highlights. Even for those who had visited before, this proved valuable giving insight to history as well as an introduction to changes. The new Hilltop building which now houses the library and science laboratories, as well as wonderful visitor facilities, was much admired and the landscaping that surround it gave a strongly optimistic view of horticulture and its value to society.

By lunch time we were all ready to explore further and split off to find more to excite our senses. Occasionally crossing paths, it was a delight to see the wide smiles as we found new treasures or visited old friends. For many, the old friends are Champion trees - the largest and finest of their kind in the UK. For others it was the most enormous climbing rose, truly a spectacle in full flower scrambling up an ancient oak to some 50-feet or more. The photo shows part of the group on Battleston Hill under a monumental statue of a horse's head.

Then it was everyone back on the coach, laden with plants and inspirational gifts, for the return to the Island - home for supper!

Date for your diary

Next spring, we are hoping to visit Abbotsbury Subtropical Gardens in Dorset - thanks to our connection with former apprentice and now high-flying gardener, David Pearce. In the autumn, a trip is planned for Thenford, the family estate of the Heseltine family, where Sir Michael and Lady Ann have spent over 20 years building a wonderful collection of trees and establishing different plantings around a number of lakes. There is also a link with Ventnor, Chris Kidd having worked there for a while early in his career and VBGFS member Conrad Williams who began his horticultural career as a volunteer with us at VBG and now works full-time at Thenford. I can recommend the 5th October issue of Country Life to whet your appetite for joining us in October 2023 - watch out for further information.

BOTANIC GARDENS at large

The first of a series of members' discoveries

ORTO BOTANICO, Catania, Sicily

On a day strangely overcast during last summer's blistering July heat, my friend Elaine and I stumbled across the wonderful botanic garden of the University of Catania, Sicily.

We had spent much of the day on a little train, circumnavigating Mount Etna, where miles and miles of super-fecund terraces of olive and pistachio trees fed by the mineral-rich lava flow made us understand why the population doesn't run from the constant threat of volcanic eruption.

Now we were walking down the scruffy main thoroughfare of Catania, overlooked by the smoking Etna. Between pizza houses and bakeries was the entrance to Orto Botanico.

A smiling man was sitting behind a desk, offering information leaflets but demanding no entrance fee. Suddenly away from the roar of mopeds and cars, there was an instant feeling of utter calm.

What was immediately impressive was the information boards and attractive signage, explaining plants and garden.

Structure, signage and calm

Founded in 1858 by Francasco Tornabene, professor of Botany at the University, the Botanical Garden is nowadays a living plant museum with a scientific and didactic mission. The garden, maintaining the original design of the 19th century, is divided into two parts on different levels: a General Garden (134,000 m^2), a formal geometric-shaped garden where exotic species are grown, and a Sicilian Garden (about 3,000 m^2) where native plants are cultivated. The latter put me in mind of Australia Garden at VBG, simply because of its imaginative structural background - typical Sicilian environments have been created, such as thermophilous woods, with different species of oaks, river valleys with willows and poplars, the Mediterranean maquis and its big bushes, as well as dry, stony garigues grasslands, volcanic and limestone rocky places, and sandy dunes.

Seeds, collected in situ and grown in the seed bank of the university department, are cultivated here: *Zelkova sicula, Quercus-fontanesii, Dicanthus rupicola* and others.

It was wonderful to wander under architectural trees and along neatly curving gravel paths to areas of theatrical cacti. The Tepidarium greenhouse was as orderly as it was beautiful. The original had been destroyed in World War II, and this replacement, while respecting the original design, was equipped to cultivate tropical plants.

The muted hues of the structural plants were at times invaded by riotous colour, such as from the Frangipani collection. Their name comes from the fragrance of 'frangipani', the name from a Roman perfumer of the 18th century.

I recommend a trip.

Roz Whistance

What is a botanic garden?

They may date back to the 4th century BCE, but the purpose of a botanic garden has changed, says **Sharon Willoughby,** historian and head of interpretation at RHS Kew Gardens

When you think about the origins of botanic gardens and the complexity of their changing role, definitions become a little slippery and interesting. Today many different types of gardens and arboretums cluster underneath the banner of 'botanic garden'. Gardens differ in style, plants, size, age, location, numbers of staff and volunteers, and mission. The work of botanic gardens has become more international, so there has been a need for a better definition – and others may wonder 'what's the difference between a botanic garden and a park?'

Exactly what is a botanic garden?

Today cultivation and preservation, as well as botanical displays and carefully-selected plant collections, is what sets a botanic garden apart. *The International Association of Botanic Gardens* decided in 1963 that a botanic garden is a place 'open to the public in which the plants are labelled'.(1)

In 2019, Botanic Gardens Conservation International defined the botanic garden as having met a list of criteria, either in part or whole, such as:

- Having a reasonable degree of permanence
- an underlying scientific basis for the collections
- proper documentation of the collections, including wild origin
- monitoring of the plants in the collections
- adequate labelling of the plants
- open to the public
- communication of information to other gardens, institutions and the public
- exchange of seed or other materials with other botanic gardens, arboreta or research institutions
- undertaking of scientific or technical research on plants in the collections
- maintenance of research programs in plant taxonomy in associate herbaria.(2)

Today, botanic gardens like Kew Gardens and Wakehurst are made up of many parts: scientific institute, collecting museum, herbarium, library, conservation organisation, educational academy, theme park, shop, café, gallery and pleasure garden.

Just like Kew, all modern botanic gardens have a role in plant science, conservation and inspiring the public to appreciate the vital role of plants and fungi to life on Earth.

Where was the first botanic garden?

The origin of botanic gardens and the title of first or oldest is highly contested amongst the oldest European gardens. Most writers agree that the oldest 'still existing' botanic gardens date back to the 16th century, the first gardens created to train medical students in plant identification – Physic Gardens. These gardens include Pisa built in 1544, Padua and Florence in 1545. Others argue that the first true botanic

garden to have both ornamental and scientific value was Leidencreated in 1590.(3) Others say that the garden created by Pope Nicholas IV (1221-1292) in the 13th century is the first.(4)

There may have been earlier gardens that resemble modern botanic gardens in purpose such as the 4th century BCE garden of Aristotle at the Lyceum in Athens.(5) It is here that Aristotle collected plants sent to him by Alexander the Great. Theophrastus used the observations he made in the garden to write *Historia Plantarum.*

My favourite origin story suggests that Spanish Conquistadores during the conquest of Aztec Mexico in 1519-1521 were inspired by the extensive gardens of Moctezuma at Huaxtepec created in 1467; the idea being that this extensive medicinal garden inspired Renaissance gardens in Europe.(6).

Here in the UK, the first botanic gardens were Oxford Botanic Gardens (1621), the Chelsea Physic Garden (1673) and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, created from two royal pleasure gardens in 1759.

The history of botanic gardens can show a type of progression in role, starting with the physic gardens of the 16th and 17th century, each era reflecting the concerns of its age.(7)

For example, in the 18th century, Kew had a large role in the creation of tropical colonial gardens, looking for new plants for commerce and science as the British empire spread.

Botanic gardens in the 18th and 19th century were inspired by the plant research and taxonomy conducted by the Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus. Civic gardens in the 19th and 20th century emphasised the horticultural splendour of their living collections.

Botanic gardens in the 21st century

Today there are 1,775 botanic gardens in 148 countries worldwide.(8) Unlike their predecessors, they are primarily concerned with conservation rather than collection. Botanic gardens are amongst the most visited cultural organisations. And, along with our passionate volunteers and knowledge-hungry visitors, we are an enormous community. Together, we're making great strides supporting present and future plant life on planet Earth.

References:

1 *Tim Entwhistle. (2018). Talking plants: The top 10 first botanic gardens*
2 *Botanic Gardens Conservation International.(2019). Definition of a botanic garden*
3 *Spencer, R. Cross, R. The origins of botanic gardens and their relation to plant science, with special reference to horticultural botany and cultivated plant taxonomy. Mueller, 35: 43-93. Royal Botanic Gardens Victoria.*
4 *Rutherford, S (2015), Botanic Gardens, Oxford and New York: Shire Publications P.9 & Piazzoni, AM, Morello, G and Bernardi, G. (2016). Guide to the Vatican Gardens. History, Art and Nature. Rome, Italy: Logart Press. p10.*
5 *Pascoe, G. (2012) 'Long Views & Short Vistas': Victoria's Nineteenth-Century Public Botanic Gardens. North Melbourne, Victoria: Australian Scholarly, p2. & Mueller, Baron F.V. (1871) The Objects of a Botanic Garden in Relation to Industries: A Lecture delivered at the Industrial and Technological Museum Melbourne', Melbourne. and Hill, AW, Missouri Botanic Gardens, The History and Function of Botanic Gardens.*
6 *Rutherford, S (2015). Botanic Gardens, Oxford and New York: Shire Publications p9*
7 *Rinker, HB (2002). ActionBioscience. The Weight of a Petal: The Value of Botanical Gardens*
8 *Botanic Gardens Conservation International.(2019). The History of Botanic Gardens.*

First published on kew.org

THE SPYGLASS INN

THE ISLE OF WIGHT'S MOST ICONIC PUB

Open 7 days a week serving up tasty home-cooked food, local favourite ales, spirits, wines and more.

Live music is back for 2022, with performances every Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

Enjoying The Spyglass doesn't have to come to an end, with four self contained apartments above the pub.

Contact us for more information.

THE SPYGLASS INN, ESPLANADE, VENTNOR PO38 1JX
THESPYGLASS.COM | 01983 855338 |

Awards at IoW College

Celebrating the next generation of young horticulturalists

For several years Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society has worked closely with the Isle of Wight College to train and support young people looking at a career in horticulture. Although, sadly, there are currently no horticultural apprentices at the Garden, the Friends have been able to offer support in other ways. During June, Trustee Sally Peake was involved in helping run mock interviews at the College for students transitioning from first to second year of their courses and also final year students hoping to gain employment.

Photo by Claire Bailey: [left to right] Rob Mew (Head of Department); student Nicholas Spencer; Sally Peake; student Salome Skeet; Catrina Richardson (Course tutor)

In July, the College had their annual Awards Ceremony at Cowes Yacht Haven and the Friends were asked whether they would sponsor two awards for both excellence and effort. Sally was invited to present the awards on behalf of the Friends. She said: "It is always immensely rewarding to see young people thriving in an educational setting, and the team at the Isle of Wight College work so hard to ensure that every learner can achieve their full potential. It is always a privilege to help, and to be a small part of the students' progress."

A Forum to share experiences

The Friends of Botanic Gardens Forum (FBGF) of which VBGFS is a member, was set up in September 2019 to encourage information exchange between Friends groups around the UK.

Although the groups operate within different financial and management structures, there is much to be gained by sharing experiences and ideas for activities and fund-raising, and much else.

If you enjoy reading about gardens and looking at lovely pictures, and are interested in what is happening at botanic gardens around the country, then head to their website **https://fbgf.org** to see the gallery and read the newsletters. The link is also on our own VBGFS website.

Rosemary Stewart was our representative from the beginning, but relinquished the role to me earlier this year. In their summer newsletter, she writes her valedictory article about how she became involved at Ventnor. She made a number of other interesting contributions to earlier editions, including one about the hopyard in November 2020. As you can imagine with Rosemary, all are well worth reading.

Val Pitts

Tree-planting celebrates 50 years

Isle of Wight High Sheriff, **Kay Marriott,** was joined by friends, volunteers, and staff from Ventnor Botanic Garden to plant a tree to commemorate the Garden's 50th anniversary.

To another 50 years: Keith Brewer and Kay Marriott

The Garden, then named Steephill Pleasure Gardens, opened on June 21, 1972, with a ceremonial tree planting by Lord Louis Mountbatten. Since then it has become a much-loved public garden, celebrating the unique microclimate of the Undercliff.

Much has changed during the last 50 years, not only within the Garden, but more widely, with climate change governing what it is possible to grow outdoors. At the inaugural opening, a Fastigiate oak was planted and, 50 years later, largely due to the warmer microclimate, a palm tree is just a stone's throw from the original tree's location. The new addition enhances the National Collection of palms at Ventnor Botanic Garden. Garden curator, Chris Kidd, said: "With a history and ethos of planting at the very edge of hardiness, reflecting a changing climate, it made sense to push ahead with the riskiest palms available."

Gardener, Keith Brewer, who was present at the original opening of the Garden, joined the celebrations and spoke of the changes he has seen over the last 50 years. He said: "Much of the Garden was very low-level planting in my day. It's certainly grown to some height over the years and much has changed, largely due to the changing weather."

Stalwarts: Jonyth Hill, Pat Luckett, Chris Kidd, Rosemary Stewart, Keith Brewer

Keith mentioned the two great hurricanes, the coming and going of frosts and the increasing temperatures the Garden has seen, all contributing to the ever-changing appearance.

The High Sheriff thanked the Friends and Volunteers for all their hard work. The Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society has tirelessly supported the Garden and is responsible for funding many of the projects, including this newest palm collection.

Report originally published by the Isle of Wight Observer

Artist in Residence

Mark Cosby offers a warm welcome to passing visitors

In September on a catch-up walk round the Garden that then-rare thing, a torrent of rain, brought Val Pitts and me scurrying for shelter in the Studio at the front of the Tropical House. This was our introduction to Mark Cosby, Artist in Residence.

"Normally I'd wander around in the Garden, painting, and just bring things back here to titivate," he says, looking at the rain.

Mark was working on what he described as a 'male Ophelia', examining Shakespeare's tragic figure if she had been male instead of the traditional interpretation of Hamlet's maligned lover. Unexpectedly, he invited us to add a few brushstrokes to his work. For anyone who hasn't wielded a paintbrush since primary school it was harder than it looked.

Welcome: Mark Cosby

Vision of a whole: Mark's riot of colour

But Mark is all about bringing the experience of art to the people. "During the Ventnor Fringe I had people painting a frieze in the open air. Here I'd love to lead a workshop day. I don't mean to teach people - I don't think you can teach art, people find their own way of doing it."

One particularly striking piece encapsulated the whole garden experience in one very familiar snapshot, the central path. There is riotous colour that could be from any part of the Garden at any season. "I think it's more real that way," says Mark, "because if I walk round the Garden my memory is of a whole host of things, not just one pathway. It's a vision of the Garden, not a fixed pastoral thing."

Mark was looking forward to an exhibition in December, and to carry on his residency into the new year.

Roz Whistance

Studio life: Roz attempts a brushstroke

Horticultural Cavalry to the Rescue

Before: Town Council HQ

An SOS from Mayor Steph Toogood, resulted in a group of Friends and Volunteers visiting Ventnor Town Council's HQ at Salisbury Gardens one July morning to tidy up the overgrown flower beds and paths leading to the entrance. Helped on with waitress service of tea and biscuits from Steph, we all thoroughly enjoyed the morning and left feeling very satisfied with a good job done, leaving the approach to the building smartened up in time to impress visitors to the Fringe Festival events there the following week.

Afterwards, Town Clerk David Bartlett wrote to thank us, saying: "Your skilled and effective gardening has restored the look of and access to the building to very good standards and all done with infectious commitment and enthusiasm."

A small group recently returned to tidy the beds after the summer and start planning for the future, helped on this time by delicious cake. With some new plants and bulbs in and mulch spread, the entrance to the Green Room is now looking smart for the winter and we are happy to agree with Mayor Steph in looking forward to a continuing relationship with our Ventnor neighbours.

Val Pitts

After: Fittingly formal

To the rescue!: Task Force Team

Soup Swap

Our cake swap has changed to a soup swap for the season, and here is **Val Pitts'** version of a Sarah Raven recipe with **Anne Hornett's** favourite focaccia bread

Roasted pepper soup with focaccia

Soup for 4-6 people:
4-5 red peppers (about 600g)
1 red onion
3 garlic cloves
Half a red chilli
2 tins good quality tomatoes
1 tbsp balsamic vinegar
3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
Handful of basil leaves
1.2 litres good chicken or
Vegetable stock
Salt and black pepper
200g Greek yogurt, to serve

Preheat oven to 180°C/gas mark 4

Quarter peppers and deseed. Roughly chop onion, garlic and chilli, place on a deep-sided roasting tray with basil. Mix oil and vinegar, pour over vegetables to coat well. Roast for 45 mins.

Pulse in a food processor with the tinned tomatoes. Thin with the stock for required consistency, season with salt and pepper. Warm in saucepan for a couple of minutes. Serve with dollop of Greek yogurt and focaccia bread.

Focaccia

300g strong white bread flour
1 tbsp olive oil
1 tsp salt
170 ml water
1/2 tsp yeast

Topping

Thinly sliced red onion, chopped olives, chopped sun dried tomatoes and your choice of herb.
Olives
Tomatoes

Tear and share: Anne's focaccia

I make the dough in a bread machine. Once dough is ready I roll out the dough to a rectangle shape (approx. 10 x 12"). Then, over the dough, sprinkle the toppings. Turn in the shorter ends and roll the bread up like a Swiss roll. Add tomatoes or olives to decorate the top.

Then leave to prove again until doubled in size. Drizzle with oil. Bake in a preheated oven 190°c/fan 170°c/gas mark 5 for 20 to 30 minutes until golden brown.

Membership News

A very warm welcome to the following Members who have joined us recently:

Richard and Letitia Ash-Lameer of Shanklin
Michelle Cain of Ventnor
James and Suzanne Cook of Shanklin
John Donaghy of Wroxall
Bryan and Susan Green of Niton
Hazel Horne of St Lawrence
Karen Melsom of Shanklin
Tricia Reeves of Newport
Stephen and Geraldine Woods of Shanklin

Patrons

Gilly Drummond OBE
Penelope Hobhouse MBE
Mike Fitt OBE
Simon Goodenough
Alan Titchmarsh MBE
Phil Le May

Please renew your Membership

The Membership Year runs from January 1st – December 31st so an easily achievable New Year's Resolution, to tick off straightaway, is to renew for 2023!

WAYS TO PAY

A renewal form on Pages 16 & 17 shows rates, payment options and our bank details if you want to pay by BACs or set up a regular payment. There is a printable form on our website under 'Membership', if you'd rather not pull *Ventnorensis* apart! If you already pay by Standing Order, you don't need to do anything unless any of your contact details or Gift Aid instructions have changed, in which case please let me, Anne Hornett, know by post or email:

• **BACs payment:** again, there is no need to send the form unless your details have changed but **please do add your postcode to the payment reference** so we can be sure where the money has come from when Members share surnames.

• **Cheques:** please fill in and post the form with your cheque.

We are very grateful to all our Friends and hope you will continue to support us and the work we do for our unique Garden.

If you have any payment queries, please get in touch with Anne Hornett, our new Membership Secretary. Anne can be contacted by **email at:** annehornett.gardens@gmail.com Or by **post:** 63 West Hill Road, Ryde, PO33 1LG

Ventnor Botanic Garden Friends' Society AGM

The Annual General Meeting of VBGFS will take place on **Thursday 20th April 2023** at the Echium Room, the Visitor Centre, Ventnor Botanic Garden. **The meeting will start at 7pm, with the bar open at 6.30pm.**

The presentation of the Harold Hillier Award will follow

Design by Simone Dickens, Coco Design Co. Kingston Smallholding Goat Farm, Shorwell, IW. PO30 3LP. Tel: 07530 867318 / 01983 551527 simone.dickens@gmail.com

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Café Botanique

FROM HOSPITAL BEDS TO FLOWER BEDS

March 13th, 6.30 for 7pm, Ventnor Arts Club

A treat is in store when Garden archivist Jonyth Hill talks about the transition from hospital to garden. She will share many previously unseen photographs, and we are hoping veteran gardener Keith Brewer will take part in the post-talk discussion.

Dinosaurs rule!: Martyn Hornett

FLORA & FAUNA FROM THE PAST ON DINOSAUR ISLE

February 13th, 6.30 for 7pm, Ventnor Arts Club

Through most of the Earth's history, recorded in the rocks on the Isle of Wight, the area has been below sea level. However, there were two periods where the land was above sea level with plants and animals flourishing. Martyn Hornett's talk will look at the flora, fauna and environment of the early Cretaceous (about 125 million years ago) when dinosaurs ruled the planet and the late Eocene (about 35 million years ago) when there were now-extinct mammals living here. The talk will be illustrated with art work from John Sibbick and we will have fossils from the Island for attendees to hold and view.

The **General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** mean that we cannot pass your details to the Garden marketing staff so, to hear ALL the Garden news and events taking place at VBG please go to the website and scroll down to the bottom of any page to find the SIGN ME UP box. You can also read their Privacy Policy. **www.botanic.co.uk**

FREE ADMISSION

THE GARLIC FARM

ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT

The complete garlic experience!

RESTAURANT, FARM SHOP, FARM WALKS & TOURS

OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK

See our website for opening/serving times and tour schedule.

"Beautiful place, great food...the highlight of our trip" "Garlic Heaven"

The Garlic Farm, Mersley Lane, Newchurch,

www.thegarlicfarm.co.uk | PO36 0NR | 01983 865 378